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MODERNITY

It was Lowell, or someone else equally happy in such things, who said that though those who lived in America might feel the greater discomfort of the vessel's prow, they had, nevertheless, the advantage of being the first to sight new land. There is a similar sense of compensation in being alive at the present time. One could easily choose from the past ages those of greater beauty and comfort, but, in the opinion of most of us, none which affords so interesting an outlook upon the changing face of existence. We are the first that ever burst into many a sea of thought and experience which have till now lain silent and uncharted. For some, the giddiness and nausea of the voyage outweigh the fascination of the widening horizon. For others, they are unfelt or forgotten in its thrill.

If it is attempted to state the characteristics of the present age there is one which is immediately obvious. The present is peculiarly a self-conscious time. Perhaps nothing distinguishes it more clearly from earlier periods than this growing disposition of humanity "to regard itself at arm's length," as Governor Woodrow Wilson has expressed the idea. Self-consciousness is to a large extent a fault of personality, but for mankind, as a whole, it is a virtue. Indeed, such a growing sense of human solidarity and responsibility might serve as a good gauge of the growth of civilization, and this in spite of certain obvious faults with which it is often accompanied.

To anyone who feels such interest in modernity and its self-revelation, a study of a picked number of contemporary thinkers is worthy of notice. Mr. Henderson has made such a study, or rather a series of such studies, in his recently published volume, entitled *Interpreters of Life*,* a volume which, in spite of what he might himself term a somewhat polysyllabic extravagance of style, is extremely interesting and illuminative. We have just used the word contemporary as applied to the subjects

* *Interpreters of Life and the Modern Spirit*, by Archibald Henderson. Mitchell Kennerley, New York and London, 1911.

of Mr. Henderson's book, and though the word is not, strictly speaking, correct, since only two of the five authors treated are now alive, nevertheless the influence of all five is so contemporaneous as to justify its use. Meredith, Wilde, and Ibsen are scarcely less a reflection of what we vaguely but conveniently call "our age" than Maeterlinck and Shaw. For the transmission of the nerve impulses, afferent and efferent, of humanity's thought is necessarily so slow as often to allow us to speak of such influences as immediate, even when the member from which they proceed is actually dead.

The choice of Mr. Henderson's subjects is fairly representative, although some might prefer to one or more of those chosen such names as those of Nietzsche, Kipling, or Rostand. The choice of the book's title is perhaps open to greater criticism. In how far do these five authors really interpret life? To interpret is to make plain or intelligible. The only one of the five who can lay claim to anything approaching a definite creed or system of life is perhaps Meredith. Ibsen declared that his vocation was not to answer questions but to ask them, and the same thing is true in a less degree of Maeterlinck and Shaw. Wilde neither asked nor answered. Of course there is another and a legitimate sense in which an author may be an interpreter of life, and yet possess neither creed nor system. A dark room may be made plain or intelligible in either of two ways—by revealing the room or by revealing the darkness. Only the first way requires a light. In the same manner a thinker who finds life merely

"A mighty maze of walks without a plan,"

(as Pope originally wrote his line), may be said to interpret life when he shows its difficulty of interpretation.

If it is granted that communal self-consciousness is a contemporary trait, it will not be denied that lack of exact dogma is another. It would be an interesting experiment to pick five representative authors at intervals of fifty years, counting back from the present, and contrast the attitudes of the different groups in this regard. Certainly 1861 as compared with 1911 would show a curious contrast. For instance, Newman, Carlyle,

Huxley, Tennyson, and Browning, represent among themselves marked differences of opinion, but they are all alike in that each does represent an interpretation of life which can be formulated in a more or less definite dogma. The attitude of Mr. Henderson's authors is, as we have observed it, obviously in contrast. Of course, the answer can be made that theological and philosophical prose is a medium for dogma, and that fiction and drama are not. But the important fact is rather that the choice of the latter and not the former mediums of expression is symptomatic of a time which prefers observation and analysis to judgment and direction.

George Meredith's gospel, as far as it may be formulated, demands in his own words

Each of each in sequent birth,
Blood and brain and spirit.

This influence has been a great one. At the middle of the nineteenth century all popular ethical exhortation was in the direction of that which bade

"Move upward, working out the beast."

Under the influence of Meredith and the biologists, we have been reminded of the importance of physiology as well as psychology and ethics, and have been shown that when the despised "beast" is "worked out," a very devitalized man is the result—that blood is no less an essential and sacred element of man than brain and spirit. And yet it must be admitted by all, save the most orthodox Meredithians, that in his own work the first member of this trinity is not of one power with the other two. Meredith's literary progeny are chiefly brain and spirit. He has not, like his countryman, Mr. Shaw, a contempt for "those two greasy commonplaces, flesh and blood," but he has a similar fastidious delicacy which makes their artistic presentation somewhat flat, though brilliant. To feel the lack, it is only necessary to compare Shakespeare's or Browning's

Fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse.

Meredith's other most marked influences were his wit and humor. Once asked the reason of his obscurity, he replied

that "Providence and Walter Besant had exhausted the Obvious." And since then, the Inobvious has been threatened with a like exhaustion by an army of those who attempt originality through imitation. Meredith's humor and subtlety were a Celtic revolt against the despotic fact of the Anglo-Saxon supremacy of dullness and obviousness. Chiefly through the influence of Matthew Arnold and himself, a Sense of Humor has become popularized and domesticated. All may grow the flower—with greater or less success—now they have sown the seed. The only bad result is that—as some one has observed about a prolonged reading of Rochefoucauld's *Maxims*—in time one begins to expect the unexpected, and humor too consistently employed acquires the monotony of solemnity itself.

When we leave Meredith for Mr. Henderson's other interpreters, the lack of creed or system is more manifest. Disraeli's familiar epigram of the religion of a sensible man might have been spoken by Oscar Wilde. To read his *De Profundis* is to feel that he possessed the religion of all æsthetes, but to feel as well that æsthetes never do, and perhaps never can, tell what that religion is. An auditor of Wilde's lectures has described them as weak solutions of Ruskin. The affirmative and serious side of him is well described thus—but his more characteristic and important side was neither affirmative nor serious. Swinburne wrote—

We match not the dead men who bore us
At a song, at a kiss, at a crime.

Wilde (although certainly not in the class of the dead men who bore us) was one of those who came under the spell of the hedonism of certain earlier ages, and so passed to a moral ruin which cannot, for most of us, be dissociated from his art. He was a confessed Antinomian, and he perished by the laws he defied. Such a career is a possible product of an undogmatic age which cannot be ignored. There is further in Wilde's writing a certain streak of soft fibre which is marked by sentimentalism as absurd as crude. It is strange to find the diamonds of his wit—which are as flashing and clear as they

are hard—caught, so to speak, in the wilted petals of such soft sentimentality.

Of Maeterlinck the former metaphor of the dark room seems particularly appropriate. The symbolism of *Les Aveugles* implies that we are all lost in the darkness of night and blindness. The fact that such an interpretation should be presented in poetic and symbolic form is, of course, most important. But we cannot agree with Mr. Henderson that either Maeterlinck's Idealism or his grasp of science is of a very penetrating nature. To compare him with Marcus Aurelius, as Mr. Henderson does, is to feel the difference between one who "sees life steadily and sees it whole" and one who sees it fitfully and in part. Nor do we think that the scientists accept the "Life of the Bee" as good science. Maeterlinck is a true child of his time just because he sees the infinite illusiveness of existence, and voices, as a poet can, its ineffable quality. We speak, however, with less knowledge of Maeterlinck's works than of those of the other authors considered, and it behoves us to be modest in judgment. To paraphrase the well known epigram: None of us is omniscient—not even the author of a short magazine article.

If Maeterlinck is the least potent of the names chosen in our list, Ibsen is certainly the most so. The influence of his drama has been such as to unroof the contemporary stage and let in upon its unreal and romantic moonshine the hard gray daylight of reality. And yet, strange as it may seem, there is for many more of Wonder, which is the true soul of romance, in this grim picturing of actuality than in Miss Marie Corelli and many of her betters. What concerns us at present with Ibsen is that he, the strongest voice of his time, is (in our first sense of the word) the least interpretative. He declared "my vocation is to question, not to answer." Perhaps the words of Mephistopheles: "Ich bin der Geist der stets verneint," are even a better expression of his spirit. In questioning the ideals about him, he is constantly denying their authority. What he never does is to answer with an affirmative ideal of his own. The well-known turn-about from the portrayal of the bad results of the idealist, as shown in earlier plays, to the bad results of

the realist, as shown in *The Wild Duck*, marks one who could doubt the efficiency of everything except dubiety itself.

Ibsen is recorded as saying: "It should be the endeavor of every dramatist to improve the prevailing order of the world." Beside Aristotle's object of the drama, "to purge with pity and terror," this sounds vague and pedantic. The reason and endeavor of Ibsen's drama was rather that expressed by another pessimist in what he calls

The cold rage that seizes one at whiles
To show the naked, old, and wrinkled Truth.

The criticism that to many others truth does not look thus was answered by Ibsen in the words (actually used by him), "I am afraid none of the sound potatoes came under my observation." And in consequence, as it has been often observed, he gives us the pathology of the social body, but never its physiology or hygiene.

And last we come to Mr. Bernard Shaw, the long advertised and advertising, whose underlying seriousness of purpose is gradually becoming apparent to a long-bewildered public. Shaw's voice is that of satiric protest not only against ideal and tradition, but against the very "Protestants of Protestantism" themselves. Contrasted with Ibsen, to whom he owes so much, his most marked attributes are his wit and humor, but there is a further contrast and one which is for our present purpose even more significant. It is perhaps more in Shaw than in any other author of the day that the great stream of scientific thought which began in the middle of the nineteenth century, and which has, for a large part, as far as letters is concerned, been an underground river, now first shows itself. Huxley defined science as "organized common-sense." Beneath all the scintillation of wit and Bab-Ballad bizarrerie of comic situation, one feels in Shaw a purpose which has as its chief directing force "organized common-sense." Nor is it a refutation of this to cite his own mockery of what he terms "the revival of tribal sooth-saying and idolatrous rites which Huxley called Science, and mistook for an advance upon the Pentateuch." He may even write entire plays to exhibit certain absurdities of science, but his most

adroit paradoxical twist will not allow his escape from the hand by which his thought is really supported, and by which he has been led to all those reforms, economic, hygienic, and eugenic, which he advocates. But to try to elucidate Shaw partakes too much of the attempted illumination of exploding fire-works by the aid of a safety match. Matthew Arnold speaks of

The barren optimistic sophistries
Of comfortable moles who cannot see.

Shaw is the caustic nitrate of silver which is perhaps the best curative treatment for such eyes. His commandment is the same as Ibsen's, and is directed to all who are too much at ease in Zion: Thou shalt not be comfortable. True it is that men shall not live by satire alone, and Mr. Shaw probably knows this as well as any. Corrosive sublimate and cautery have their important therapeutic uses, but they cannot take the place of bread and meat, although they may in the long run effect a better digestion of those indispensable commodities.

One is naturally led to ask the reason of the lack of constructive interpretation of life in the present as compared with the preceding generations. Certainly one reason is the lessened regard for religious dogma. Of the five men chosen as representative of the thought of 1861, three—Newman, Tennyson, and Browning—were in avowed sympathy with the teaching of a church. The other two, Carlyle and Huxley, were distinctly outside of such influence. None of the five whom we have just considered as representatives of to-day show church influence. But even more significant is what we have emphasized as the lack of assumed authority by the thinkers themselves. With the possible exception already noted, they are not only not Orthodox, they are not even what Mr. Chesterton rightly defines as Heretics—that is, individuals who confidently believe that they alone of all the world represent Orthodoxy. Their attitude is, in the main, that of Oscar Wilde: "I am a born Antinomian; I belong to the men who are made for exceptions, not for laws." That such an age of Antinomianism and intellectual Anarchy should mean only perversity or despair we do not, however, admit. It does mean, among other things, what Arnold called

"an epoch of expansion," as opposed to "epochs of concentration," and it means a growing sense of the complexity of life in all its relations, political, social, and philosophical. The thoughts of men are widened with the process of the suns, not by any means always widened in wise or healthy directions, but nevertheless widened that they may find new wisdom and new health. The so-called doctrines of Pragmatism and Pluralism are interestingly significant of such changes. Men are feeling that life is too big and too little understood a thing to be always packed into convenient intellectual concepts, and men are realizing the great diversity of spiritual experiences which can be tapped—to use the phrase of William James—for spiritual help.

The conclusion of the whole matter, then, would seem to be that though our time is not one of assured interpretation, it is, none the less, one not without other compensatory qualities of earnestness, common sense, and hope.

"This ghastly thin-faced age of ours" is self-confessedly lacking in Beauty, Dignity, Simplicity, Largeness, and a hundred other noble attributes which one spells with a capital letter, and calls vainly from the vasty deep of the desirable. At least it is fairly honest with itself and there is abroad in it, politically, ethically, and spiritually, a wistfully eager desire to be led aright.

It is interesting, and, however futile, it is harmless (if one preserves a lively sense of one's limitations) to look around in our time, and try to read its lessons. Just because the new lands ahead are yet so low and dim upon the horizon, they possess a certain thrilling interest which is peculiarly our own. And even though it be in vain that we cry, "Watchman, tell us of the night," yet this is granted us: that we can look up into the stars and talk together of them, that we can, with patience and cheerfulness, wait for the sun, wondering when and where it may rise again.

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